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Bender

Jess Lockhart

Time: Summer, 1969

Place: A/1/28th Infantry Company Headquarters, Lia Khe Viet Nam

Mike Platoon was just finishing a scheduled three-night, two-day R&R after a month of patrol missions.

I told the platoon sergeant to form the platoon in front of the company headquarters. I stood in front of the platoon looking at a bunch of guys that could have been character actors in a hobo movie. They had ammo bandoleers, claymore mines, and socks filled with C-rations hanging all over themselves. As rag-tagged as they looked they were my men and brothers. We had mostly arrived in country within a few weeks of each other and had learned our trade together, and we were pretty good.

I yelled in my best 22-year-old command voice, "Report."

The Platoon Sergeant answered, "14 men present. Two on R&R. One in the platoon tent".

I went over to the platoon sergeant and ask in a low voice, "What do you mean one in the platoon tent?"

He replied, "Bender refuses to come to the formation." I told him to take charge of the platoon and stomped off toward the platoon tent.

I opened the flaps of the partially lit, large tent and saw Bender sitting on the edge of his cot, staring at the walls. As I approached Bender I told him, "Get your gear and get out in formation."

Bender replied, "I ain't going."

I sat beside him and asked, "What?"

He told me that he had had a dream the night before that if he went on this mission he was going die. I tried to explain that we all had moments when we were scared but we worked through it and that it had only been a dream.

Again, "I told you I ain't going."

"Do you know that you could get court-martialed for missing a movement?"

He replied, "I ain't going."

I went to the company command post (CP) and told the first sergeant that Bender was in the platoon tent. I returned to the platoon to board trucks and load on helicopters to be inserted somewhere on an unnamed trail to start our 14-day mission.

After we got settled in our ambush site I ask my RTO what Bender's problem was. He told me that before I had taken over the platoon they had almost been annihilated; only six men survived, two of which were wounded. A man on watch had fallen asleep and the VC walked up on them and sprayed the men as they slept, killing 10 men. Bender was one of the two men wounded. He got an AK round in his butt and was in the hospital for three months. Bender was the last of the survivors left in country and he had only two months left in his 12-month tour.

After seven days we were resupplied, and I got a note from the first sergeant that Bender was up on charges to be court-martialed. Two months earlier I had written Bender up for a Bronze Star with a "V" for pulling two wounded men back to the medic during a firefight. So here he was getting court-martialed and he had a CIB, Bronze Star with a "V," a Purple Heart, and an Air Medal (for 40-plus air assault missions) including the other Viet Nam medals. This guy was not a coward; he was just a 20-year-old kid who got scared.

I later found out Bender did get court-martialed and was sentenced to spend the remainder of his tour in Long Bien Jail (LBJ) and received a dishonorable discharge.

The next time I saw Bender was at the platoon's reunion in 1995. During the reunion, I got him off to the side and asked him how things were going. He told me that he finished his tour in LBJ and came back to the States where he was discharged. He returned to his old neighborhood in Newark where he had grown up and gone to school. His neighbors ostracized him and he was deprived of a soldier's privilege of telling war stories, or to show medals that he had earned. He couldn't even get a decent job because of the dishonorable discharge. Bender finally found a lawyer who got the discharge upgraded. He continued with his life but with the shame hanging over him. In his mind he felt he had let his brothers down and was a coward.

That night, in my motel room, I told my wife that Bender had broken my heart because I felt I had let him down. I should have done something that morning rather than walking away and leaving him to face a court-martial. I considered myself a good combat leader but as a 22-year-old the army had not prepared me to cope with the philological challenges of an infantry platoon leader. After Viet Nam the Army recognized PTSD as a disorder and trained leaders in identifying and helping soldiers with symptoms, rather than simply kicking the soldier aside and possibly ruining his life.

Sunday afternoon at the reunion, as everyone was hugging each other and saying their goodbyes, Bender came up to me and thanked me for letting him come to the reunion. With a lump in my throat, I told him, "Bill you were just a 20-year-old kid who got scared. You have nothing to be ashamed of. We were all scared. You just dealt with the problem differently. The Army handled the issue wrong. You were drafted and served your country; you didn't run to Canada or try to avoid the draft as a conscientious objector. You will always be a part of this platoon."

Bender has come to a couple of reunions since then and I always give him a hug.

I'm now almost 70 years old and it's been 47 years since that morning in Lia Khe. Sometimes I ponder what I could have done differently to keep Bender from facing a court-martial. I knew most of the officers on that board and I know I could have explained Bender's frame of mind. I wasn't there for him and I'll have to live with that decision. I never judge a veteran's service, because we're all brothers and sisters with common thread of compassion that runs through us.